

## **Left Behind...for the Good of Creation**

**An Ascension Day sermon by Wendell Wiebe-Powell, Elkhart, Ind.**

**Texts:** Acts 1:6 – 14, Psalm 68: 1-- 10 & 32 – 35, I Peter 4: 12 – 14 & 5: 6 – 11, John 17: 1 – 11

They had followed this Jesus through thick and thin, observed miracles, tenderly touching the “unclean,” experienced his challenge to those misusing positions of power, known wrenching rejections and...finally his execution... in the manner that they execute subversives, and then... THEN surprising encounters as he reappeared to them. And now they had gathered around him one more time...expectantly... *[They and their people had long known the grinding exploitation, repression and humiliation of the Roman superpower.]* “Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom of Israel?!” To which he replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.” It’s as though he was saying, don’t dwell on signs and speculations but be ready, be alert, open your hearts for what God will do in you and among you! Which begs the question, How do we have hearts open to receive and move with God’s Spirit now?

In the next scene in the story, their teacher and friend was lifted up and taken out of their sight in a cloud. The scripture goes on to say in verse 9, “... while he was going and they were gazing toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, **why do you stand there looking up toward heaven? Jesus will come back the same way...**” Who wouldn’t stand there a bit slack jawed looking up into the sky when this savior/prophet stirring the hopes of the people and the anger of the authorities, this one they had walked with through thick and thin all of a sudden disappears on a cloud?! Then two guys in robes show up and ask them why they are standing there looking up into the sky?!! Reminds

me of early morning on the construction site; the crew just has just heard instructions from the foreman and they pause for a brief moment – perhaps thinking about the heavy day ahead or getting their head around the next task they have to do... -- and then the foreman says – typically in terms not repeatable in polite company – what are you waitin for?!!

Who wouldn't be dumbfounded by the question, "Why do you stand there looking up toward heaven?" But perhaps we the hearers of this story two millennia later and possibly the disciples as well, misunderstood the question. The next thing the heavenly beings said is revealing. "Jesus will come back in the same way he came." In other words, there is reassurance, comfort to this bewildered and discouraged little band. He'd be back and we can see as the story continues, evidence of the Holy Spirit powerfully with them.

But then back to what Jesus said in reply to their question about restoring Israel, "It is not for you to know the time or periods that the Father has set..." But we will be given the Holy Spirit. We will have power to be witness to this Jesus, to what he taught, to what he showed us by his example...witnesses in the way we live as well as our words; witnesses in our home city, in our familiar places, witnesses to the border regions of our people, to the edges of our comfort zones and then to other cultures, the unfamiliar, some who we don't get along with and make us feel uncomfortable, even enemies, even – as our text from Acts says, "to the ENDS of the EARTH!

After the disciples were asked why they were looking up, they traveled a Sabbath day's journey; SABBATH... which reminds us of rest, regrouping, reconnecting, restoration. They gathered together in an upper room. Sound familiar? They gathered together in the spiritual

center of their world, women and men in prayer, deepening of the bonds of friendship, forming a core of strength for the journey out beyond the familiar, for the many challenges that lay ahead; a kind of gestation time. This is an important image for all people of faith but perhaps particularly for activists who are sometimes inclined to launch out immediately when we have a burn-on about an urgent need in society. As the old saying goes, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Deepen your connections with each other, with God's spirit; get your house in order. That's a lot of what our Lenten journey was about. But don't stay there. If we try to have our act together perfectly, lifestyle consistent with our ideals in every respect, before stepping out, then we will never move beyond our circles of familiarity. We will limit our openness to the spirit of this kingdom-on-earth-as-in-heaven-Jesus. Some who stick their necks out may be scrutinized for inconsistencies and quietly discredited or shunned. But every imperfect stumbling stepping out in risk, into unfamiliar places toward promise and hope, produces growth and is not in vein – *And that now is the challenge to those who are **not** activist inclined.* – There is a time then for launching out, for daring and risk – even in our imperfection – for confronting the death producing powers, for proclaiming the good news of that which gives life, for love overcoming hate, for doing justice, for showing mercy, for walking humbly out into the unknown with the spirit of God burning passionately in our hearts.

The call to be witnesses, "to the ends of the earth" is often assumed to be referring to reaching out globally to save souls. But what if we pause for a moment and extend that proclamation to be witnesses, to the earth itself? That is, to reach out with saving and healing power to the brokenness of the earth? What would that look like? Well, there's of course putting our own house in order. What needs cleaning up on the home front to be in good relationship with God's creation? There's driving less, bicycling more, gardening, putting in CFL lights, insulating,

installing solar collectors, eating locally grown, reduce, reuse, recycle... But what about belief systems and how those affect the way we relate to the earth? How do Christian views of the resurrection of Jesus, life after death, the end of the world, affect our relating to God's creation? The very redemption story that is intended to be life-giving ironically is sometimes used in ways that are death producing! When Christians dwell on the heavenly realm while viewing the earth as only for humans to use and then be tossed into some cosmic garbage disposal and what happens to the environment doesn't ultimately matter, that has a direct effect on how they relate to the world. Some even seem to revel in the destruction of the environment as a "hastening the end of the world for the return of Jesus." Burn that fossil fuel, spray that Round Up, spend billions on armaments, drain that wetland, build that new housing development over virgin prairie, pedal-to-the-metal in my SUV, come Lord Jesus! It's a kind of McDonald's Happy Meal with disposable packaging view of the earth.

If our story from Acts - calling to be witnesses - extends to the earth itself, is it not then, a call to be active in the protection and restoration of the earth, including the changing of belief systems that result in exploiting the earth?.....God's unfathomably complex, intricate, interwoven, beautiful creation? Is this not a call to change belief systems that give permission to use up and poison creation, belief systems that wherein we feel we are being faithful while we wash our hands and turn a blind eye to policies and structures that are destroying the earth?

There is good news. We can heed the ancient call in Deuteronomy to, "choose life," to proclaim the renewing movement of God's Spirit which extends to all creation! And in the power of that same Spirit, we can find courage to purge beliefs and uses of scripture that perpetrate destruction of God's beloved creation. We can hold up the image of original blessing, "And God

saw that it was good” **before** humans were even on the scene; depicting inherent worth in all things. Anyone who has spent considerable time in wild untamed places knows its incalculable beauty and inherent value apart from any utility to human beings, knows we are only one part of a web of creatures with complex, delicate interrelationships. This sings in my heart because I have stood in awe as the sunlight filters through ancient towering sequoias; because I have laid out on the open prairie in wonder as the meadowlark sings and roots sink ten more feet down into humus built over millions of years; a complex community of billions of organisms busy in the soil, alive beneath me.

Is the question, “why are you looking toward heaven?” a reminder that, in Christ, the here-after and the here-and-now are no longer separated? Is it significant that there is no comma in the words of Lord’s Prayer, “on earth as it is in heaven”? And yet we usually pause as if the two are separated! Does the departure of Jesus in physical form, paradoxically free us to carry on this work of healing and restoration in the power God’s Spirit? Does it somehow unbridle us to be in the movement of God’s kingdom – or kin-dom – unfolding on earth?

But where do we find hope and good news in the face of massive destruction across the face of the earth? Maybe I’m just an odd duck. But I do not find hope at all in beliefs and self improvement methodologies that avoid or deny hard and destructive realities as “too much negativity.” Rather, I find hope by facing reality squarely and searching for how God and the spirit of truth may be moving **even** in the midst of the darkness.

Scientific research overwhelmingly and unequivocally reveals that climate change is caused by humans and accelerating faster than previously predicted worst case scenarios. Without regulation that massively reduces the burning of fossil fuels, there will likely be in the

neighborhood of a twenty-foot sea level rise over the next century. Some projections are much higher, with tipping points potentially accelerating the process. If unprecedented and increasing floods, droughts and wild fires are not seen as a call to pull out all the stops for transformation from extractive fossil fuel dependent economies, then we are ostriches with our heads in the sand.

Maps that show drastically retreating ice in the polar regions just over the last couple decades. A large percentage of humanity depends on water flowing from glaciers in the Himalayas; glaciers that rapidly are melting away. Oceans and rain forests are cradles of life and "lungs of the earth," producing a great deal of the earth's oxygen with a high percentage of the earth's biomass and biodiversity. Yet the forests are being cut at an insanely rapid rate and the oceans are becoming acidified due to pollution causing vast "dead zones." The California beaches my siblings and I frolicked on as kids used to be strewn with beautiful shells but now it is hard to find any as the increased acid content of the ocean is decimating the mollusks and other life essential for the health of the oceans and the earth itself.

A study published by the journal *Science* and led by conservation expert Stuart Pimm, shows that the human activity has driven current rates of species extinction to 1,000 times faster than the natural rate" The study cites habitat loss, invasive species, climate change and over fishing as the main factors contributing to the plummet in biodiversity. According to Noah Greenwald, endangered species director with the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), "This important study confirms that species are going extinct at a pace not seen in tens of millions of years, and unlike past extinction events, the cause is us," Germanos says that since the cause is us, "the solution, too, lies with us. Pimm [told](#) the *Associated Press regarding looming mass extinction*, "Whether we avoid it or not will depend on our actions." Could it be that debates about

apocalyptic scriptures and scenarios are now a distraction? An apocalypse is happening and we must contend with it if we want to pass on a livable planet on to our children.

Some tipping points have already been passed. 350 parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere are needed to maintain homeostasis. We are now around 400 and rising. Very hard times ahead are unavoidable. But there are plenty of things we can do – as Wes Jackson likes to say – to soften the landing. And remember, faithful action in the Spirit of love is never in vain. As we read in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:58 *Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor **is not in vain***. God will never abandon us no matter what we are facing. But, here again, people of faith must be careful to avoid using such assurance as an excuse to neglect our responsibility to pursue the healing and justice for all of God's creation. Rather, the assurance that God does not abandon us, can free us to be part of God's kin-dom movement here on earth as in heaven. It reminds us that, even if we don't see the fruits of our labor, they will be part of the kin-dom to come.

Fixing our gaze toward heaven may be a distraction from our tasks at hand or even a cause for some to avoid caring for the earth. On the other hand, hope for restoration of creation and life after death can paradoxically be a source of strength and courage to carry on even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds; to carry on the process of healing and restoration such as calling our church-related institutions to get on board with the fossil fuel divestment movement and support legislation that would rapidly faze out carbon pollution. We often feel insignificant and overwhelmed, but each one doing a part **is** significant. Being in solidarity with those who are devoting their energies to wider structural change is empowering. Attention to personal lifestyle is important but, if we are serious about caring for God's earth we must also support

efforts that deal with economic political systems and policy. Christ – as Mennonites like to say – is Lord of all aspects of life. Personal faith and lifestyle are parts of a larger whole.

With humility, we do well to learn from and listen to groups who have been “in the trenches” of working to protect the environment; acknowledging how the Church has often dragged its feet or outright opposed their efforts. But we can also offer the gift of spiritual rootedness for the struggle for justice and sustainability. We can be the witness of lives empowered by the Spirit of God, inspired by that jubilee-shalom-kin-dom-of-God vision that helps us maintain hope when all that we have hoped for seems to be slipping through our fingers...to carry on in spite of the odds; to witnesses to love that transforms our own lives, transforms the way we confront death producing forces AND transforms those forces themselves. We can be witnesses that faithful action is not in vain; witnesses that those things that are death producing and death itself do **not** have the last word. Like wheat planted before the icy winter, it will rise up on the song of spring.

So when we are tempted to gaze too long toward heaven and wonder when the kingdom of God will be restored, let us trust that we are in the hands of God who is like a compassionate father and mother to us. Let us continue to open our hearts to the indwelling wisdom and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Let us grow in our witnesses in our particular community but also to the **ends of the earth**. Let us cry out with the groans and travail of the earth itself and be part of a new birth..... the renewing of all creation.

And I leave you with these words of Miguel de Unamuno *"Only he who attempts the absurd is capable of achieving the impossible."*

And Paolo Lugari *"Yes it is impossible, therefore it will take a little longer"*